

## Story and Photos by Heike Hasenauer

Within a few weeks of the Allies'

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wish all of them a Merry Christmas. May the Holy Christ-child bless you and all your  
families far away in America. May the battle soon cease and peace rule over the world  
and you all return to your families safe and sound. We shall always thankfully  
remember that you liberated us from the terrible German occupation.

[Illegible names and signatures follow]

**MEMORIAL**

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**(Main photo)** Some 300 American soldiers signed their names on a cave wall after Christmas Eve services on Dec. 24, 1944. The next day they departed for Bastogne. **(Insets)** The Brothers of Maastricht, the monks who own the cave, continue to enhance it with religious sketches and sculptures.



*On Christmas Eve in the Netherlands, people gather in the same cave where soldiers prayed before departing for the Ardennes in 1944.*

June 6 landings on France's Normandy coast, more than a million troops had landed on French soil. By mid-September, Allied forces fought along a front that stretched from the Netherlands, along the borders of Belgium, Luxembourg and France, all the way to Switzerland, with the Allied center in the Ardennes Forest.

The Germans planned to break through the Ardennes en route to the Belgian port of Antwerp, thereby splitting the Allied armies in two and eliminating the port upon which the advancing Allied forces relied for logistical support.

As the air-raid sirens blared over Maastricht, warning of a looming Luftwaffe attack, U.S. soldiers filed solemnly into the cave and its cocoon-like darkness. The following day, they were headed to the Ardennes to engage in some of the fiercest fighting of World War II.

Before they left, they etched their names with charcoal on the cave's walls, not knowing that more than half a century later free people would return to the spot for Christmas Eve services, read their names and reflect on the painful war era and the gifts of peace and freedom.

"We can never return anything to the soldiers who are buried at Margraten U.S. Military Cemetery," said Sermon Smitshuysen, secretary of the Foundation of the Commemoration of the American Christmas Celebration, 1944, in Maastricht.

"But we can continue these ceremonies to keep their memories alive," said Smitshuysen, whose uncle resurrected the Christmas Eve service in 1980 for the first time since that fateful night in 1944.

Today, Smitshuysen, together with 120 monks from the Brothers of Maastricht — the group that bought the land and accompanying cave in 1921 as a retreat to which they come once a month to draw and sculpt — maintains it.

Soldiers from the U.S. Army's 254th Base Support Battalion in Schinnen help prepare for services by setting up chairs and providing flowers, among other things, Smitshuysen said.

The 2.8-kilometer-long cave is but one of several inside a mountain chain, Smitshuysen said.

Crumbling sandstone and 96-percent humidity pose continuing problems, including cave-ins and fading inscriptions.

A recent \$25,000 restoration project added huge crossbeams to reinforce the ceiling over the altar area, which bears the 300 original signatures of attendees at the 1944 mass.

Plexiglas shields have been placed in front of the signatures, to prevent visitors from brushing against the cave wall and damaging the inscriptions.

Foundation members — along with the monks, who have added their own



**Sermon Smitshuysen stands before one of the sketches completed by the Brothers of Maastricht.**

religious sculptures and drawings to the gathering space — have instilled the cave's significance in countless members of the South Limburg community and elsewhere, said 254th BSB spokeswoman Rita Hoefnagels.

"They're confident that the memory of the first Christmas Eve service will live on for generations to come," Smitshuysen said. □



**Inside the cave, a huge map depicts the routes used by Allied forces in liberating Europe.**